

Story for performance #557  
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Source: Bob Woodward, 'My staffers made a mess of Iraq: Ford', *The Washington Post* in *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 29/12/06.

Tags: [celebrations](#), [child/parent](#)

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There was an asteroid coming and it could blow up the earth, that's what he had said to her in a strangely monotone voice, although she was more intent on vacuuming pine needles from the carpet—her attempt at keeping the world orderly and safe.

Earlier she had asked him to play outside if he wasn't interested in helping pack up decorations but instead he'd turned to the computer, his freckled adolescent back hunched over the keyboard. He used to be such an accommodating child but not even Maddie had been able to draw him into the game—and taking down the tree used to be a game of sorts because there was a family tradition of planting it afterwards pretending that it would grow.

The tradition had been born years ago on account of Maddie because she was the baby and had cried and cried when she found out that Christmas trees went to the tip after the New Year. Maddie thought that any old twig would take root and grow as long as there was a bit of soil and a watering can. So they had driven out to a scrubby patch of land and dug a hole in the January heat, had done it for the last five years, although Maddie was eight now and perhaps didn't quite believe in miracles as much, and now another Christmas had come and gone.

The cards from friends and relatives were stacked in a pile ready to be put in a Tupperware container and stored in the attic. The tinsel and lights lay at the bottom of a cardboard box. Maddie was wrapping the rest of the decorations as her brother continued to tap the computer keyboard. His attention shifted from the screen to the television set, which was droning in the corner, but never to his fingers. Like his father he could type without looking at his hands, as if each finger had a brain of its own. She found it eerie that her husband could turn to answer a question, his fingers still moving as if they had been grafted from a dead man, perhaps one who had been murdered in the middle of such a task, the nerve endings still performing that function without being connected to any state of consciousness in the here and now.

Alan was still sleeping, having come home late last night. Business as usual, even in the holidays, and long ago she'd stopped asking him about the clients and the jobs. There was a time when she had missed him when he went away, had felt a great hole of emptiness, but as with any gaping hole, she'd filled it with clutter, most of it taking its meaning from the anticipation of his return. The fuss she made over getting ready for Christmas, the baking, the silly presents, having her toe nails painted pink, all in readiness for his coming home. Although lately, amongst all the activity, he seemed to be having difficulty finding his natural space.

'If an asteroid is big enough,' said her son, still hunched over the computer keys, 'it can rip through the atmosphere and the world as we know it will be gone.'

'Gone?' said Maddie suddenly taking in what he was saying.

'Yes', said her brother quite firmly, turning to look at her properly. 'All gone.'

It was a nasty thing to say to an eight year old girl who was happily wrapping a Christmas ball, and his tone was threatening. She told Maddie not to listen to him and for him to turn the computer off but Maddie was quick to take the chair next to him to see for herself. And in that moment she realised that her daughter had been slightly bored with the task of packing away the tree. Indeed Maddie hadn't really been all that interested in getting ready for Christmas this year. It had been she who had wanted to bring out the decorations, put on the carols, frost the windows with pretend snow.

The tree had slumped in the bucket of water. She freed it from the bricks that had held it in place, surprised at how heavy it had been when she first brought it into the house, how whole and substantial, and how light it was now, light as a feather. It would be easy enough for her to put into the boot of the car without any help from her husband or children. Easy enough for her to drive into the scrubby bush and dig a hole. She took in the cluttered living room—the Play Station, the roller blades, the pile of new blouses that she'd bought for Maddie, and was filled with an odd sensation that she was peering through the thinnest skin of a pale balloon, unable to name what could be seen quite clearly on the other side.

'If an asteroid is big enough,' said her son, tapping an image on the computer screen, 'then it can rip through the atmosphere. There will be dust storms all around the earth and tsunamis. Come here Mum, don't you want to see it too?'

She was holding the tree lightly in one hand and his request sounded more like a demand. It would be easy enough to accommodate him but she knew that if she sat next to her son that she would see a face as hard as Alan's and she didn't want to see that. Indeed she didn't want to hear anything her family might want to say to her or to ask any questions of them either. Instead she turned to the door. She would put the tree in the boot and drive into the scrub and on the way she would imagine an asteroid bouncing into an atmosphere that was as puffy as a pillow. The surface would tear and the air escape from inside in one great sigh.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Carol Major.*